

Galveston Bay pollution limits discussed

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Work is moving ahead in establishing “total maximum daily load” limits for dioxin and PCBs in the Houston Ship Channel and Galveston Bay, according to reports shared with a Houston-Galveston Area Council stakeholder meeting Tuesday.

Hanadi Rifai, a University of Houston professor who is working with the project, shared results of testing of both sediment and fish tissue samples from the ship channel and the bay, part of the process of determining the extent of the pollution levels in preparation for setting limits.

The total maximum daily load program is an effort by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to address pollution concerns by determining how much of specific contaminants a waterway can handle without exceeding levels at which the water is unsuitable for its intended use.

These limits are determined for waterways that are considered impaired – those that don’t meet water quality standards.

While much of the local concern has focused on dioxin contamination from the San Jacinto Waste Pits – a former disposal site just north of the Interstate 10 bridge over the San Jacinto River – Rifai presented information that other dioxin hot spots exist in the Houston Ship Channel itself and also in Armand Bayou farther south.

She reported that testing from sediment indicates pollutants are much more prevalent on the west shore of the bay, which has heavy industrial and residential development, than in eastern parts of Galveston Bay and Trinity Bay, which are sparsely developed.

However, she said, fish tissue samples show both dioxin and PCBs are present in fish caught in all parts of the bay, since fish can feed in one part of the bay then swim elsewhere.

The group, which provides input to the TCEQ, recommended continuing research and work to set limits to reduce pollution levels.

The group also heard a report from the Environmental Protection Agency on testing around the San Jacinto Waste Pits site.

In addition to the main site north of the bridge, the EPA is also doing testing on a concentration of contaminants south of the bridge.

For more information about the San Jacinto Waste pits, go to the Galveston Bay Foundation website at galvbay.org/advocacy_sjrwp.html.